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ABSTRACT

This slide kit presents the diverse stylistic achievements of 15 African-American artists who worked between mid-19th century to present day. Essays included in the packet incorporate information from interviews with artists Hughie Lee-Smith, Elizabeth Catlett, Benny Andrews, Lois Mailou Jones, Allan Rohan Crite, Howardena Pindell, and Jack Whitten. In addition to the essays and discussion questions for each of the 15 represented artists and slide images, a glossary of terms and a bibliography is included. (MM)

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African-American Art
from the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum
The Martin Office of Museum Education

Wadsworth Atheneum

March, 1995

Dear Educator:

This slide kit represents the diverse stylistic achievements of fifteen African-American artists who worked between the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. As the artist is the best person to discuss his/her work, in preparing these essays I interviewed the following artists extensively--in many cases it will be his/her voice you hear, not mine: Hughie Lee-Smith, Elizabeth Catlett, Benny Andrews, Lois Mailou Jones, Allan Rohan Crite, Howardena Pindell, and Jack Whitten. The history of the African-American artist is a saga of racism. But it is also a tale of triumph. Determined, talented, these artists transcended their hostile world and created a body of work many scholars feel is responsible for rescuing fine art in America from certain death. There is an avid interest in art by African-Americans. I hope this slide kit satisfies some of it.

In addition to essays and discussion questions for each work, a glossary of related terms, and a suggested bibliography is included.

I would like to extend my kind thanks to Cynthia Cormier, Curator of Education; Gail Holzrichter, Associate Curator of Education for Family and Children's Programs; Kendra J. Dowd, Education Assistant; and Winona Kress, Education Intern for their assistance.

Sincerely,

Luisa Washington Chapman
Cheshire, CT

LC/kjd

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African-American Art
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Slide List

1. **Recollections of Italy,** 1864, Robert S. Duncanson
   Oil on canvas: 20½ x 39 in.

2. **Virgin and Child,** 1920's, Henry Ossawa Tanner
   Oil on canvas: 32 x 25 in.

3. **The Negro Looks Ahead,** c. 1944, Richmond Barthé
   Bronze: 16 x 10½ x 10½ in.

4. **Carnival,** 1950, Hale Woodruff
   Oil on canvas: 43 x 34 in.

5. **Pietà,** c. 1950, Charles Henry Alston
   Oil on canvas: 40¼ x 27 in.

6. **Red Azaleas Jubilee,** 1976, Alma Thomas
   Acrylic on canvas: 72 x 52 in.

7. **SHE-BA,** 1970, Romare Bearden
   Collage on paper, cloth, and synthetic polymer paint on composition board: 48 x 35⅞ in.

8. **Peasant Girl, Haiti,** 1954, Lois Mailou Jones
   Oil on canvas: 31¾ x 21 in.

9. **A Bit of Romance on Hubert Street,** 1937, Allan Rohan Crite
   Oil on canvas board: 18 x 24 in.

10. **Seated Woman,** 1993, Elizabeth Catlett
    Onyx: 26¾ x 8 x 14⅛ in.

11. **Shades,** 1977, Benny Andrews
    Oil and collage on canvas: 35⅞ x 35⅞ in.

12. **Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts,** 1988, Howardena Pindell
    Acrylic, tempera, cattle markers, oil stick, paper, polymer photo transfer and vinyl tape on sewn canvas: 118⅞ x 71¼ in.

13. **Einstein's Violin,** 1991, Jack Whitten
    Acrylic on canvas: 73 x 95 in.

14. **Band of Angels: Weaving the Seventh World,** 1992-93, John Biggers
    Oil and acrylic on canvas: 48¼ x 72 1/16 in.

15. **Summertime,** 1989, Hughie Lee-Smith
    Oil on canvas: 34⅛ x 46 in.

1. Robert Scott Duncanson
1823 - 1872
Birthplace: Seneca County, NY

Recollections of Italy, 1864
Oil on canvas
20½" x 39"

Recollections of Italy presents a scene from the Italian countryside. In the foreground are lush vegetation, toppled ruins, a fountain, and peasants with animals. In the middle distance, a grand estate is nestled by a meandering lake. A mountainous horizon recedes into infinity and a towering tree on the left and an ancient temple on the right balance the composition. Bathed in a tonal glow, the scene evokes an ideal calm.

In 1853, Robert Scott Duncanson traveled to England, France, and Italy to study landscape paintings, particularly the works of Claude Lorrain and J.M.W. Turner. Claude had also influenced Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School. Through periodicals and exhibitions, Ohio River Valley painters such as Duncanson, T. Worthington Whittredge, and William Louis Sonntag became disciples of Cole.

Recollections of Italy is characteristic of a classical landscape. Dwarfed by nature's grandeur, the earthbound human figures are insubstantial. Man's greatest achievements, symbolized by the ancient ruins, are merely temporal, as is life on this earth. Vegetation in the foreground is clearly rendered. As we proceed through the landscape, however, forms become less distinct. Clearly Duncanson is concerned with the classical idea of perspective. The balanced composition is realized as one panoramic sweep and although the fountain breaks the foreground plane we remain spectators.

Duncanson painted in the Hudson River School tradition, but his work was "beyond the plane of the merely imitative."[1] Sketching an entire landscape on site could take hours. To quicken the process, 19th-century landscape artists relied on daguerreotypes (a form of photograph) to capture details they later copied onto their canvas. Duncanson, a former daguerreotypist, could have used this devise to compose this picture.

As the title implies, *Recollections of Italy* was painted from memory. Eleven years had passed since Duncanson visited the ruined city of Pompeii. This picture was painted in 1864 in Montreal. Duncanson had withdrawn from the race-hatred the Civil War brought, taking refuge in Canada, "where his color did not prevent his association with other artists and his entrance into good society."[2]

Born in Seneca City, New York to a white father and a free black mother, Duncanson settled in Canada. Little is known of his art education. Some historians say he was a house painter, but when he arrived in Cincinnati about 1841, he already knew how to paint. A mid-19th-century African-American could not have found a better place to work in America than Cincinnati. Prosperity from the pork industry, cultural rivalry with the East, staunch abolitionist sentiments, and a free black population on this major Underground Railroad stop crowned Cincinnati "the Queen City of the West." Few painters, black or white, have enjoyed the

mainstream art connections and generous patronage Duncanson did during his Cincinnati years. Some of the city's most prominent addresses were graced by the work of Robert S. Duncanson, "the best landscape painter in the West."[3]

Duncanson boldly challenged himself, painting portraits, murals, still-lifes, and seascapes. He turned increasingly to landscapes in 1853 after his Harriet Beecher Stowe based *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*, one of his two extant paintings of black subject matter, was criticized for being a "Tomitude." Landscapes were neutral subjects, allowing an artist of color to transcend the eternal color dilemma and paint the subjects he found pleasing. When a disgruntled relative feared the fair-skinned Duncanson may try and pass for white, the artist admonished: "Mark what I say in black and white, I have no color on the brain all I have is paint."[4]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Without giving the title, where is the setting for Duncanson's painting? America? or Europe? What makes you think so?

2. Do you think Duncanson visited Italy to paint this picture? Why or why not?

3. This style of landscape painting was extremely popular in mid-9th-century America. How might Duncanson's experience as an African-American painter have differed from his white artistic colleagues?

2. Henry Ossawa Tanner
1859 - 1937
Birthplace: Pittsburgh, PA

Virgin and Child, 1920s
Oil on canvas
32" x 25"

In *Virgin and Child*, we are present when the angel Gabriel tells Mary she has been chosen to give birth to Jesus. The swirls in Mary's face broadcast her awe. Tanner has propped her against the wall, suggesting the news has so stunned her, she needs a support. With upturned head and arms behind her, Mary's body conveys total submission to the will of God. Rendered larger than life, her large feet are planted firmly on the ground, she is well qualified for the task.

Tanner's early style was steeped in French Academic realism. During Tanner's mature phase, his style was more personal and unique. He kept the heroic, religious theme favored by the Academy, but his execution became abstracted. In this picture, for example, he presents Jesus as a wisp of a halo swaddled in a few brush strokes. He also experimented with pigments, creating the blue/greens we see in *Virgin and Child* (known as "Tanner Blues") and often used thick, impastoed paint, and an unusual, deep glazing technique evident here.

In *Virgin and Child* the composition is simple and direct. This sparse interior was based on those Tanner saw during his several visits to the Holy Land and to Morocco, where he went to study the authentic settings of the Bible stories. Critics compare his portraits of Jews and his depiction of intense human emotion to Rembrandt. What distinguished Tanner from other painters, however, was his handling of light. In *Virgin and Child* we are made aware of the angel's presence by the glow cast over Mary's body. The dramatic lighting technique in Tanner's *The Annunciation*, was called "a miraculous achievement in 19th-century American painting ... something for which there is virtually no model in official art."[1]

Henry Ossawa Tanner was the first born of seven children of Bishop Benjamin Tucker and his wife, Sarah. Bishop Tanner was a proud third generation Pennsylvania resident and a powerful, international figure in the American Methodist Episcopal church. The young Tanner vowed to be an artist when he was a boy of eleven or twelve. He wrote in his diary that on seeing an artist painting in Fairmount Park near his home in Philadelphia, "it was decided on the spot, by me at least, that I would be one, and I assure you it was no ordinary one I had in mind."[2] His parents tried to talk him into something more practical, like the flour business, however, when the sickly Tanner became ill, they supported his decision to pursue a career in art. Rejected repeatedly by art teachers because of his race, he was finally admitted to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he studied the anatomically precise approach of Thomas Eakins. After attempts to earn a living failed, first in Pennsylvania then in Atlanta, Tanner moved to Paris in 1891 where he studied at the Académie Julien under Benjamin-Constant. Although black leaders had hoped he would return to the United States and start a school for black artists, Tanner remained in France.

He began his career painting landscapes, marine and animal paintings, and genre scenes. He also painted black genre scenes such as *The Banjo Lesson*, yet after 1895 he abandoned black subject matter altogether for the religious paintings that would bring him unprecedented international fame.

Although he did not start an official school, Tanner influenced generations of African-American artists. Artists such as Hale Woodruff, William Edouard Scott, and William H. Johnson made pilgrimages to meet him in France just as he had made pilgrimages to the Holy Land. He was a symbol that race was no barrier to being a great artist, succeeding during the inferiority campaign of the Reconstruction when blacks desperately needed a hero. Nearly one hundred years after Tanner's birth, contemporary artist Reginald Gammon painted his portrait in *Homage to Henry O. Tanner*, which shows the artist larger than life, appearing about to break through the picture plane. The painting is telling. Although Tanner was a small, frail man, Gammon has given him the same divine qualities Tanner gave Mary in *Virgin and Child*.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Who is this woman? Where is she? What is happening? How might you determine that this is religious subject matter?

2. How does the color, lighting, and sparse confined interior enhance the drama?

3. Tanner's artistic training was grounded in classical studies at both American and French art schools, based in drawing and in the study of perspective and the human figure. Is this training evident in *Virgin and Child*? What artistic qualities might make his work unique?

3. Richmond Barthé
1901 - 1989
Birthplace: Bay St. Louis, MS

The Negro Looks Ahead, 1944
Bronze
18" x 10½" x 10½"

"All Negro history, potentiality, and hope broods in *The Negro Looks Ahead*,"[1] wrote Cedric Dover in American Negro Art in 1960. Richmond Barthé, the most widely exhibited African-American artist during the 1930s and 1940s, was interested in the particular character of his subjects. In this figure, the prominent nose, massive forehead, direct gaze, and arched brow project a victorious future. The serene figure is imbued with spirituality--a quality Barthé felt he could achieve only by a naturalistic approach: I want to "capture the beauty that I've seen in people, and abstraction wouldn't satisfy me...My work is all wrapped up with my search for God. I am looking for God inside of people. I wouldn't find it in squares, triangles and circles."[2]

Transported by his life-like sculptures, critics thought he had found God: "Richmond Barthé penetrates far beneath the surface, honestly seeking essentials, and never, after finding these essentials, stooping to polish off an interpretation with superficial allure. There is no cleverness, no damaging slickness in this sculpture. Some of the readings deserve, indeed, to be called profound."[3]

As a young boy, Richmond Barthé, like Allan Rohan Crite, drew people on the street. By the time he was 12, he had shown at the Mississippi County Fair. At the age of 18, the future Guggenheim recipient won a first prize in drawing. Although he had left school at the age of 14, with the aid of a Catholic priest and an impressive portfolio, Barthé was accepted at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1924. At first he studied painting, however, when a teacher suggested he could better understand the third dimension if he modeled in clay, Barthé sculpted the heads of two classmates. These fledgling attempts showed the unusual talent that launched his career.

His models included Katharine Cornell, John Gielgud, and Sir Laurence Oliver. Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater House in western, Pennsylvania is graced with Barthé's statue of Rose McClendon, and in front of the Haitian palace in Port-au-Prince is his monument to Toussaint L'Ouverture. In a rare, early purchase of art by an African-American, the Whitney Museum acquired the beautiful *Blackberry Woman* which evinces Barthé's "great technical ability for working in bronze."[4]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What type of person has Barthé presented to us in *The Negro Looks Ahead*? Strong? Proud? Independent?

2. What might Barthé have had in mind when he named his sculpture *The Negro Looks Ahead*? What does the figure look to?

3. How might the character of the sculpture reflect the social and political life experienced by African-Americans in the 1930s and 40s?

4. Hale Woodruff
1900 - 1980
Birthplace: Cairo, IL

Carnival, 1950
Oil on canvas
43" x 34"

Carnival's pictographic form recalls Egyptian hieroglyphics; the shapes resemble traditional African sculpture, while the resonant surface amplifies the ancient theme. As we "read" this picture, our eyes move from one complex, spacial arrangement to another. The colors are different than what we are accustomed to seeing together--yellows, tans, violets, and grays. All attempts at finding a discernible pattern fail. Inevitably we are drawn to the dominant, black image in the middle, resembling a cat. What does this painting mean?

Hale Woodruff said: "I think abstraction is just another kind of reality. And although you may see a realistic subject like a glass or a table [or a cat], you may have to transpose or transform that into a picture...that to get [you] involved...[the picture] has to extend that vision, not having to...verify that which [you] already know, but extending [your] vision and [your] way of seeing, so that...a wider experience opens up to [you.]"[1]

In 1950, when this painting was created, America was excited about its first art "invention"--Abstract Expressionism. France had been the world's art capital, which is one reason that American painters such as Henry O. Tanner, Lois Mailou Jones, and John Singer Sargeant went there. Now America was in the vanguard, and Woodruff, teaching at New York University, was a key participant but with a slightly different agenda:

> "Issues which were of vital concern to the American Vanguard were not the same issues that concerned Hale Woodruff. Several of the artists expressed the primacy of the act of painting. William Baziotes noted that, 'whereas certain people start with a recollection of an experience and paint that experience, to some of us the act of doing it becomes the experience.' And Reinhardt observed, 'I don't understand in painting the love of anything except the love of painting itself.' Robert Motherwell [said] 'we are involved in the process and what is a finished object is not so certain.'"[2]

Like Woodruff, these artists wanted to extend our way of seeing; unlike him, they did not use recognizable images to do it. Woodruff's experiences had prepared him for another direction. Born in Cairo, Illinois, Hale Woodruff was an only child. Upon the death of his father, Mrs. Woodruff brought her young son to East Nashville, Tennessee. A deft draftsperson herself, she enjoyed seeing her son copy Gustave Doré's images from the family Bible. His interest in art increased when he read about Henry O. Tanner in The Crisis.

After graduating from high school, Woodruff attended the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis. He was not happy there. While modern art was in the air his teachers held to the old Academic style. He was thrilled when, in 1926, he won the Harmon Bronze award for five

paintings. With his award of one hundred dollars he went to Paris to study.

In 1931 he established America's first school for African-American artists at Atlanta University; (in 1942, he would inaugurate the seminal Atlanta University annual art exhibitions). In 1936, he traveled to Mexico and apprenticed with leading communal art advocate Diego Rivera, under whose inspiration he painted the Talladega Slave murals in 1938.

When vanguard artists spoke of painting just for painting's sake, Woodruff disagreed. Like so many African-American artists of his generation, including Charles Alston, and Elizabeth Catlett, Woodruff sought an art which could elevate black people: "The dignity of man; this is what I find in African sculpture. There's always the dignity. There's always a very great sense of self. And the significance of the self. This is why you'll find this very frontal, monumental, austere quality in all of their sculpture. This is the kind of image we should strive for..."[3]

Cubism offered a precedent: while studying in Paris during the late 1920s, he saw how modernist masters such as Cezanne and Picasso successfully merged Impressionism with African sculptural form. Like Stuart Davis, who gave "the essence in pictorial form of American life"[4], Woodruff hoped to pictorialize the essence of African-American life within the broader context of American art.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What do the colors and patterns found in this painting remind you of? Is there anything about them that reveal an African influence?

2. How does an abstract work of art convey ideas, emotions, or meaning?

5. Charles Henry Alston
1907 - 1977
Birthplace: Charlott, NC

Pietà, 1950s
Oil on canvas
40¼" x 27"

The *Pietà*, the representation of Mary grieving over Christ, has captivated artists since the 14th-century. Charles Alston, however, radically alters the iconography to express the institutionalized persecution of blacks in America. By associating racism with the crucifixion of Christ, he elevates the suffering of blacks to the realm of the spiritual and universal.

In Alston's *Pietà*, four superimposed torsos are thrust against the picture's flattened space, achieving a mural-like immediacy. The profiled gaze of the central, dominant figure is upward, appealing. One figure, apparently dead, is foreshortened, creating the illusion of three dimensionality that brings us deeper into the picture. Both the figure on the right and the deceased figure have mask-like faces. Their arms bulging under rolled-up sleeves, reveal them as laborers. Their grayish shirts and angular torsos echo the color and lines of the building.

Alston explored the Pietà theme before. This version recalls the artist's personal experiences with racism at the core of America's government. On assignment with Fortune magazine during World War II, he traveled throughout the South to document the under utilization of the black labor pool in the war effort. This job brought him to segregated Washington, D.C., where his assignment was to draw cartoons for the War Department for publication in the African-American press to increase black wartime participation. He soon realized no one took his art seriously. Indignation turned to outrage when he, a 36 year old black artist, was drafted to fight in the infantry. Considered "cannon fodder," infantry solders were usually black and the first to die. Not only was the black laborer expendable, America had no need for a black artist either.

The building in the picture looks like the Lincoln Monument. How ironic, Alston suggests, that in a country symbolized by this monument to freedom such blatant racism could exist. However, the lines joining men to monument imply that if one group of people perish then the entire country perishes. *Pietà* is one of many of Alston's "social protest" paintings: "As a black American, who sincerely believes in the ideals upon which this country was founded, I cannot but be sensitive and responsive in my painting to the injustice, the indignity, and hypocrisy suffered by black citizens."[1]

Among his other themes were the blues, the family, youth, and heroes. Though Alston's work dealt primarily with African-American themes, he was also concerned with formal issues of art: "As an artist, formed culturally and environmentally in the traditions of Western man, I am intensely interested in probing, exploring the problems of color, space, and form, which challenge all contemporary painters."[2]

In *Pietà*, cubism allows him to stack the Lincoln Monument on top of the figures with no regard for perspective. It permits this disintegration and reconstruction of the figures. From a distance, there seems to be only three faces; however, on close inspection we see another face directly in the axis of the central figure's left shoulder. This face belongs to the man with no head. Cubism's superimposed planes enable Alston to achieve a composition as jarring as his subject matter. The influence of African art, the cornerstone of cubism, is seen in the figures' long necks and mask-like faces. Block-like torsos also reveal Alston, the sculptor.

As an activist, illustrator, muralist, and educator, the Columbia University-educated Alston was a key figure in the emergence of African-American artists in the 20th century. During the 1930s, his studio at 306 West 141st Street in Harlem was the headquarters for the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) and the Harlem Art Workshop. He was affiliated with the Spiral Group and worked on the Golden State Mutual and Harlem Hospital murals. As Jacob Lawrence's first teacher, he demonstrated the hands-off teaching style that would characterize his 25 year tenure at New York's Art Students' League.

Just as he refused to dictate to his students, he rebuked the critics when they tried to limit his diverse stylistic range which included realism, abstraction, and sculpting in mahogany, bronze, and limestone. "I do not go along with this insistence of critics that you develop a certain consistency. The whole creative thing is one of exploration".[3]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Who are these people and why have they gathered together? What might have happened to the fallen figure?

2. How does the color and composition reinforce the drama?

3. How might this scene be different if the artist rendered the figures in a more realistic way?

4. Do the mask-like faces recall African masks?

5. What might the significance of the large sun or the official-looking building be?

6. Alma Thomas
1891 - 1978
Birthplace: Columbus, GA

Red Azaleas Jubilee, 1976
Acrylic on canvas
72" x 52"

Red Azaleas Jubilee engulfs us in a field of flame red, mosaic-like shapes, punctuated with stark white spaces. The sweeping half circles energize the painting, as do the irregular geometric forms, keeping our eyes jumping from one place to the next. Brush strokes are short, purposeful. Dense on the left, the pattern opens up on the right to emit more light. The calculated mood is successful: we feel jubilation.

Red Azaleas Jubilee is part of a series of "Earth Paintings"[1] that deal with wind and flower themes, inspired "by the display of azaleas at the [National] Arboretum, the cherry blossoms, circular flower beds, the nurseries as seen from planes that are airborne, and by the foliage of trees in fall."[2] Thomas' love of nature can be traced to her tomboy summers spent cavorting in the lush foliage and flower beds of her grandfather's plantation near the Chattahoochee River in Alabama.

Thomas was the first and only graduate of Howard University's newly created art department, class of 1924. During a 35 year teaching career, she remained a student herself, receiving her M.A. in education from Columbia University's Teachers College and studying at the American University with Jacob Kainen. As a member of Lois Mailou Jones' "The Little Paris Group," she worked in a representational idiom, painting still lifes, jugs of flowers, bowls of fruit and such. Then "[she] passed through an expressionist stage, and emerged as an abstract painter, using the pure color parallel stripe format pioneered by the Washington Color Painters."[3]

In many regards Alma Thomas was an artistic rebel. During the 1970s, when many African-American artists were creating protest art, her non-representational paintings bucked the tide. Believing that "an ability to express oneself accurately in the world made one free,"[4] she also abandoned the Washington Color Painters' formal approach and purposely set out to create something "significantly different, something different from anything [she had] ever seen, different from anything [she] had ever done."[5] In recognition of her brilliant originality, both the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington gave her a one-person exhibition when she was 77 years old.

From a distance *Red Azaleas Jubilee* looks like a wall with red patches of paint over it. Thomas taught her students that "Art could be anything. It could be behavior as long as it's beautiful."[6] This is what Thomas is showing us in this picture--a graph of her behavior while painting. On close inspection the red patches reveal uneven brushwork. There is a blending of pigment in each shape, creating hard as well as soft edges. Sometimes she painted a red shape. Then painted over it in white, letting the red come through. Sometimes the paint is flat with a glaze trickled down the side. All decisions seem to have been made on the spot. Changes are not concealed. But are they changes? Or are they intentional? To Thomas the act of painting is as important--as artistic--as the painting itself.

"All the gardens are so formal," Thomas would say, "they're formalized by man."[7] Here, her irregular patterning frees the flowers--and the painter herself. In order for the painting process to mirror her dynamism she discarded slow drying oils for precise and quick drying acrylics. Acrylics could also give her brilliant color that, like watercolors, would allow light to pass through. *Red Azaleas Jubilee*'s unabashed color has the power to transport us to another world. "A world without color would seem dead," she said. "Color for me is life."[8] Life in paint is Thomas.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Thomas often used nature as her inspiration, what natural forms might she have drawn from in this painting?

2. Does this abstract work of art succeed at capturing the beauty of nature?

3. Is this work happy or sad? Support your answer.

7. Romare Bearden
1914 - 1988
Birthplace: Charlotte, NC

She-Ba, 1970
Acrylic, collage on paper
48" x 35"

The Legendary Queen of Sheba sits on her throne while her faithful servant protects her from the scorching sun. Perhaps they are crossing the Arabian desert en route to Israel, where she will test King Solomon's wisdom. Bearden sought to redress the exclusion of blacks from the texts of Western culture. He "edited" literary masterpieces, replacing white heroes with black ones, as in the Homeric Odysseus Collages. Sometimes he exalted black historical figures. Queen or maid, the black woman is regal in Bearden's world. Observed Bearden scholar Mary Schmidt Campbell: "No one could doubt the reality of the women in Romare Bearden's art. Women, as he perceives them, are the heart of his community, the Black community....He has penetrated their reality and found something profound, basic."[1]

Perhaps the importance Bearden assigns to women stems from his relationship with an extraordinary one, his mother. New York editor of the Chicago Defender, Bessye Bearden was an outspoken, civic-minded, social dynamo. The 1930s and 1940s found the Beardens in their Harlem brownstone hosting such cultural giants as Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, and Andy Razaf.

As expected in an upper middle class black family, Bessye wanted Romare, her only child and a mathematics wiz, to become a physician. He appeased her by earning a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics from New York University in 1935. However, his considerable analytical skills would not be used to study anatomy, but to reinvent the collage technique using complex forms and spatial arrangements. To his assistance came another African-American invention, jazz:

> "I listened for hours to recordings of Earl Hines at the piano. Finally, I was able to block out the melody and concentrate on the silences between the notes. I found that this was very helpful to me in the transmutation of sound into colors and in the placement of objects in my paintings and collages. Jazz has shown me the ways of achieving artistic structures that are personal to me."[2]

Flat planes of opulent color radiate from She-Ba, catching the light, like a stained glass window. These are the deep, tropical colors of St. Martin, Bearden's wife's home, impressions of which radically altered his watery palette after his first visit there in the early 1950s. The servant's black profile, set off by a yellow ground, mirrors She-Ba's. Yellow trickles through She-Ba's scarf, dress, and scepter. Deep blues and greens create a somber majesty; splinters of red dramatically punctuate her sleeve, her crown, and the right-hand border. Some scholars believe these colors symbolize African unity for Bearden. Though this may be true, he was less concerned with symbols than with creating a beautifully designed work of art: "Sometimes, in

order to heighten the character of a painting, I introduce ... dissonant ... reds, browns, and yellows [to] disrupt the placidity of the blues and greens."[3]

Bearden's formal art education consisted of only a year and a half of training at New York's Art Students' League, however, he did not let this deter him. A voracious reader, he assimilated the masters' greatest techniques and emerged not only a pioneering artist, but a scholar. *She-Ba's* jet face has Byzantine origins. The compressed, rectangular space suggests 17th-century Dutch artist Jan Vermeer's interiors. The formal composition of Egyptian art (She-Ba and servant, in profile, frozen in time and oblivious to us) keeps us at a respectful distance:

"I do not burden myself with the need for complete abstraction or absolute formal purity, but I do want my language to be strict and classical. In that sense, I feel my work is in the tradition of most of all the great exponents of flat painting."[4] America agreed. In 1987, he was awarded the coveted National Medal of Art.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What is a collage? Have you ever made one?

2. What is the main subject of this collage? Who is the person behind her?

3. Is this woman an important person? What makes you think so?

8. Lois Mailou Jones
1905 -
Birthplace: Boston, MA

Peasant Girl, Haiti, 1954
Oil on canvas
31¾" x 21"

"I was in Haiti on my honeymoon," Lois Jones reminisced. "The house was located on the road to Kenscoff, up in the mountains where the peasants lived. It was always a sight to see them at three or four in the morning, coming down those hills in droves, as they set out to walk fifteen or twenty miles to the marketplace. They were so straight with these baskets piled with things. You wondered how they could carry all of that and walk all those miles ... many times barefooted. They were so poor. Still they were happy. But this girl attracted me to the extent that we called her. She was beautiful. And she was so happy to pose ... in my garden ... with her basket of avocados. I painted her exactly as she was."[1]

To accentuate the oval curve of her model's face and slanted eyes, Jones has tilted the girl's face and posed her body in a formal, oval form, which shows the influence of her Academic training. Beginning with the crown of the girl's head, we can trace a curve down her left side, turn inward with her leg, continue beneath the circular basket, and then return up the right side to her head. These contours contrast sharply with the straight lines of the cement wall. The lush foliage balances the avocado's color and shape and echoes the girl's graceful lines, which, besides her face and "sweet"[2] disposition, are all reasons why the artist may have thought her beautiful.

Jones work in Haiti continued the tradition of exoticism begun by the French painter Eugène Delacroix's Moroccan paintings and continuing with Henry O. Tanner's travels to the Holy Land. The work of William Edouard Scott, another African-American painter, preceded Jones with quaint studies of the Haitian countryside. Jones' paintings, however, were revolutionary. In her Haitian paintings Jones was holding up a non-European standard of beauty more than a decade before the "Black is Beautiful" campaign of the 1960s civil rights movement. The powerfully organized color, applied with a palette knife gives volume to the girl's form, creating a sculptural effect. This could be a travel poster; the model, a national emblem. In painting the portrait of a young peasant woman, Jones unconsciously captured the soul of a people.

Though painters such as Hughie Lee-Smith manipulate the visual world to express their innermost feelings, Lois Mailou Jones, "adventuresome"[3] by nature, loses herself in her subject in order to depict it faithfully. Too broad an artist to be confined within one aesthetic movement, her stylistic range looks like the work of three or four artists. "I paint from feeling. Tomorrow I may do something very different. Everything depends on the feedback I get from the subject. Everything changed when I went to Haiti ... the people, the light, the color, the design affected me."[4]

Her earliest paintings, characteristically painted on location, were seaside watercolors of the famed African-American resort Martha's Vineyard, her summer home since girlhood. It was here, on the beach, in the 1920s that pioneering sculptress Meta Warwick Fuller advised her: "Lois, you're talented, but you're not going to make it in this country. You're going to have to go abroad....Meta told me she had studied with Rodin and worked in his studio," Jones said. "That was all I needed to hear, I ... set my goal. I was going abroad like Meta Fuller and Henry O. Tanner."[5]

Fortified with an "excellent foundation"[6] from the Boston Museum School, in 1937 Jones changed directions at the famed Académie Julien in Paris. Trained by the leading Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters of the day, her shimmering watercolors gave way to architectonic structures. The light, especially, changed her style. "Painting in Paris was very different...the mysticism of Paris affected me ... the paintings in the Luxembourg Garden and on the River Seine ... Montmartre--all were so mystical and silvery gray. I did hundred of studies. It was a wonderful feeling ... the light..."[7]

Lois Jones is a pioneer who has begun to be recognized only in the last ten years. Although she has won many awards, she often had to send white friends to collect them. Maligned as "that colored artist,"[8] some of her awards were revoked. A textile designer, illustrator, and a prolific artist, she was the devoted Howard University teacher to famed artist Elizabeth Catlett and artist-art historian, David Driskell. At Howard, Harlem Renaissance spokesperson Alain Locke's encouragement to tap her African heritage resulted in eleven trips to Africa and to yet another style change--cubism. Still, Jones said, "I did my best work in Haiti. I was in love and I fell in love with the people."[9]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Who is this young woman? And where might this scene have taken place? What makes you think so?

2. Jones found her model quite beautiful, how has she told us this in her painting?

3. How does the color palette define the setting?

9. Allan Rohan Crite
1910 -
Birthplace: Plainfield, NJ

A Bit of Romance on Hubert Street, 1937
Oil on canvas board
18" x 24"

Roxbury, an African-American neighborhood in Boston, has the same problems as all of America's urban communities. In 1937, however, when *A Bit of Romance on Hubert Street* was painted Roxbury was "still intact" Crite recalled. "While there was job discrimination from utilities, banks, stores, etc., and ... demonstrations, the neighborhood ... [was] stable. People knew each other. The corner store was a community institution. Doors were not locked. The streets knew no fear no matter how late the night."[1] For a major city, Boston is unusually small and though its crowded, narrow streets make driving a nightmare, walking is a joy. Today nobody pays much attention to "artist-reporter"[2] Crite, who has been walking around sketching since adolescence.

Crite's first teacher was his mother. She took him to museums, strolled him around Boston's teeming neighborhoods pointing out the city's rich architecture and history and taught him how to narrate his drawings. By the time he entered the Children's Art Centre in 1916--"the only museum built especially for children"[3]---he had learned to "think with a pen and brush."[4] Throughout high school he attended the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' vocational program and, turning down Yale University, attended the Boston Museum School on scholarship, two years behind Lois Mailou Jones. By 1936, the Boston Globe was calling him a "creative genius."[5]

At first Crite followed the customary path of his African-American peers. He exhibited in the 1931 Harmon Exhibition; in 1934 he painted easel works for the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.); in 1942 he sent an oil, *Three Sisters*, to Hale Woodruff's Atlanta University Exhibitions. Then World War II took its toll: hundreds of his oil paintings were destroyed in a warehouse fire. (To avoid a similar tragedy for American art, he gave several of the remaining ones to the Boston Athenaeum.) Later, the Great Migration changed the idyllic neighborhoods and Crite took a job in the defense industry, he then vanished from artistic spheres.

Illustrating technical equipment at the Boston Naval Shipyard over the next 30 years, left him no time to paint. Yet his creative needs were still met: "I make no distinction between illustration and fine art. It's all drawing."[6] During this period, he also satisfied a spiritual need by creating his famed religious art. Today, throngs of visitors file past Allan Rohan Crite Square, Boston's gift for his priceless historical paintings of its neighborhoods, now demolished by "urban removal."[7] Then they continue to the Crite House Museum and pay homage to this living national treasure.

Compositionally, *A Bit of Romance on Hubert Street* is typical of Crite's street scenes. Like curtains on a stage, tall brownstone buildings are backdrops for people on the street. Although Crite's canvasses are usually bursting with statuesque women and frolicking children, in this

picture there are only five figures. The woman on the left is walking down the street, possibly on an errand. A boy and his girlfriend are on a bicycle, while three children on the right hold a conference. The sheltering buildings and their rich, amber tones heighten the romance. "A community is like a living room,"[8] Crite said. The carless street breaks the foreground plane, putting us on Hubert Street: "I want to give you a sense of your being there."[9] Still we feel the way he did--like a spectator: "I didn't live in a community of artists. I was isolated, a loner and observer rather than a participant."[10]

Up close, we can see carefully delineated bricks on one building, fine lines on another. These are the telltale marks of a draftsman that set Crite's work apart. For while the figures are "neo-primitive" archetypes, the buildings are sometimes as exact as the jet propulsion systems the artist illustrated for the Navy. Was Crite a reporter or a surveyor? What is the subject of his paintings--the people or the places they inhabit? When these figures are situated against different buildings, a fresh and equally powerful painting is created.

"There is nothing profound in my work," the artist insists. "The business of art is communication...communication enables us to talk to each other."[11] Crite had hoped that his paintings of "ordinary"[12] African-Americans going about their errands, shooting marbles, playing horseshoes--falling in love, would offset the denigrating "Jazz Negro"[13] and "Backwood Southerner"[14] stereotype prevalent in the 1930s.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What is the setting of Crite's painting?

2. How might this urban setting differ if the scene were painted today? How might it be the same?

3. In Crite's painting he humanized his community. How would you depict your commmunity? Who would you include and what would they be doing?

10. Elizabeth Catlett
1915 -
Birthplace: Washington, D.C.

Seated Woman, 1993
Onyx
26¾" x 8" x 14⅛"

Seated Woman continues Elizabeth Catlett's exploration of her favorite subject--the African-American woman. This interest was reflected as early as 1940 with her University of Iowa Master of Fine Arts thesis, *Mother and Child*. "I have nothing against men," she said, "but since I am a woman, I know more about women and I know how they feel. I think there is a need to express something about the working class black woman." She is at "the bottom of the scale. And that's what I do...I like to interpret women's ideas, women's feelings."[1]

Head tilted upward, arms relaxed, posture erect this sculpture, Catlett said, "expresses an alert, dignified, beautiful African-American woman." ("Could she also be white?" I asked. "Yes," the artist said. "She could be white or Indian....")[2] Encouraged by her Arts Student League teacher, Ossip Zadkine "to experiment with abstraction,"[3] the artist abandoned strict realism.

In *Seated Woman* there is strength in the woman's form, which is weighted toward the reproduction center. Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Lowery Stokes-Sims wrote: "In Catlett's oeuvre, the female form is never---eroticized, but rather analyzed and defined for its...fecundity and strength."[4] By carving spaces between the figure's arms and torso, legs and chair, Catlett humanizes her; she is *of* stone, not *in* it. This sculpture is somewhat atypical. Catlett's work usually has more simple, stylized lines. In this piece, "to make a variety of interests,"[5] she carves a concave drapery around the figure's chest, between a convex bosom and a cylindrical neck. She is also inspired by her materials, allowing its qualities to dictate subject matter, rather than force her ideas. "The reason she is seated," Catlett explained, "is because I had a piece of stone that shape."[6]

To maximize the figure's beauty, Catlett has polished the onyx (she calls it "orange") to a high sheen. Does it seem strange that this woman has a bald head? In Catlett's work, hair is frivolous. She feels the obsession with hair has enslaved black women. There is something retiring about this *Seated Woman*, as if after years of hard work she is finally coming in to rest. The onyx's translucent quality imbues this figure with an approachable, gracious quality, permitting a dialogue more intimate than hard edged-wood allows. Could this work be autobiographical, mirroring Catlett's mood? "I don't have too much more time to work."[7]

Dignified, struggling, working black women have populated the artist's work in a dazzling array of bronze, marble, limestone, onyx, mahogany, cedar, eucalyptus, and lithographs. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Catlett placed her art at the service of the civil rights struggle. Powerful sculptures, such as the 1970 *Target* showing a black man's face inside a target, indicted police brutality. The 1968 lithograph *Black is Beautiful* reasserted the black standard of beauty Lois Jones had initiated in 1954 with *Peasant Girl, Haiti*; and the much reproduced *Sharecropper*

dignified women of the fields. Yet cause never diminished what Art in America considers her "technical brilliance and perfectionist sensibility."[8]

"It has taken a long time to find out that technique was the main thing to learn from art schools," she reflected. "It's so important--technique--how to do things well. It's the difference between offering our beautiful people art and offering them ineptitude. They deserve the very best and we have to equip ourselves to give them our very best. You can't make a statement if you don't speak the language."[9]

Elizabeth Catlett, whom artist and art historian David Driskell calls "one of the great women artists of our time,"[10] made certain she received a strong, technical background, and she has many citations to show for it (including the "first honor" for that *Mother and Child* thesis which was exhibited in 1940 at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago.) She was the head of the art department at Dillard University and prior to earning her MFA from the University of Iowa where she studied under *American Gothic* creator Grant Wood, she attended Howard University, studying under Lois Mailou Jones. It was Jones and Alain Locke who introduced Catlett to African art, whose mask-like features and planar lines would give form to her work. The 1940s found her in Mexico studying with Francisco Zuniga, "one of Mexico's leading sculptors, learning techniques of ceramic sculpture that dated back to pre-Hispanic times."[11] In *Seated Woman*, the use of massive shapes, stylized, nearly abstracted subject achieved by the smoothing and polishing of surface, a monumentalized figure and the curvilinearity of form all derive from ancient pre-Hispanic art traditions. Also in Mexico, home to muralist friends Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, Catlett found a political consciousness akin to her own. Harassed during the McCarthy "witch hunts", she stayed in Mexico, essentially expatriating just as Tanner had done a half century before--and for the same reason--freedom.

Why would Elizabeth Catlett, by all standards middle class, whose father had been a mathematics teacher at Tuskegee Institute feel a need to champion poor black people and women? Her "big experience in life,"[12] occurred in 1944. She was in Harlem working among the poor blacks who had come north from the South during the Great Migration. "Their interests and their desire to learn about literature and art and economics and history were great."[13] A decade earlier, Catlett, had been denied admission to the Carnegie Institute of Technology because of racism. She knew that being a middle class black was no protection against prejudice and she felt a solidarity in their struggle that gave purpose to her life.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Describe the *Seated Woman*'s character. Support your answer.

2. How might this woman represent the experiences of African-American women?

3. Catlett often placed her work at the service of the Civil Rights movement, what message is she trying to convey in *Seated Woman*?

4. How does the material (onyx) reinforce the message of the sculpture. Imagine her carved of wood, what different feelings would you get?

11. Benny Andrews
1930 -
Birthplace: Madison, GA

Shades, 1977
oil and collage on canvas
35⅞" x 35⅞"

In *Shades* all we see of the figure standing beneath the tree is his upper torso and face. Andrews has collaged half of his face in burlap; the other side is splotchy white paint. His nose protrudes from the picture's surface as does his zippered mouth and denim clothing. The uneven eyes are crossed. Andrews' figure is looking inward--someplace deep within, inaccessible to us. The composition is rendered in earth tones on a subdued, gray background.

What is this image all about? Benny Andrews explained: "During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a lot of talk about complexion and color among African-Americans. *Shades* has a double meaning. It has to do with shades in terms of skin color and shades in terms of being under a tree. This figure is saying nothing else as far as I am concerned, but if you get another meaning out of it, that is valid too. There are many ways of seeing a work of art. People bring *their own experiences* to art. That is what makes art universal and live century after century."[1]

The figure's multi-colored face is a metaphor of the skin color dilemma that has divided black people since slavery, when fair skinned blacks worked inside while darker skinned ones toiled in the fields. Growing up as he did, picking cotton in rural Madison, Georgia, Andrews knows a lot about toiling in the fields. Like all sharecroppers, the Andrews family was miserably poor. Poverty, fierce segregation, and inadequate schooling left an indelible impression on him: "When you come up the way I did, it shapes you."[2]

The deep South shaped his aesthetics. Denied by Jim Crow laws to attend art school in Georgia, he attended the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, where painting in the accepted Abstract Expressionist style left him cold. He wanted to put himself into his work: "I [wanted] to paint my experience in ways that reflected the me in them ... to express in artistic terms, the weather-beaten faces, the large hands, the burlap and the ropes that said Georgia, South, and my home so clearly....So the collage had meaning in its textures, but it also had another meaning, and though I know it in my gut, I'm never sure I can ever fully articulate it, but I'm always trying."[3] Southern racial politics also taught him to distrust appearances. To survive it was mandatory to "get behind the false front."[4] *Shades* is typical of the strong undercurrent of ambiguity in Andrews' which speaks of his awareness of society's duplicity.

The figure in this collage stands alone. The isolated individual is a recurring theme in Andrews' work and like many of his themes can be traced to his childhood. During the 1930s and 1940s, there were no powerful groups to force Georgia to bus black students to school. Instead blacks walked three miles or more to school, even in the rain. No groups took down the "whites only" signs that prohibited blacks from entering many public places, effectively robbing them of a full life. There was no group to protect a black man from an angry lynch mob. Any accomplishment was done inch by inch with the help of the lone, brave individual. Such an

individual was Andrews' mother, who fought the tenant captain so young Benny could attend high school, the first sharecropper's son in the community to do so.

As a young man, Andrews saw many of his peers destroyed by hopelessness. Some managed to escape to the North during the Great Migration of the 1940s. Andrews learned quickly that if he was to succeed at the art he had loved since he was two years old, he would have to fight--to be determined. During the 1960s and 1970s, as co-founder of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, he fought the white art establishment to get museum representation for black artists. He is still fighting.

Critics do not know where to place his iconoclastic collages. Unlike Bearden's flat, designed, illusionistic collages, Andrews' works are three dimensional, sculptural. To release the figure from the restrictions of the canvas he started sticking their his noses out in the 1970s: "I have always wanted to make my forms as strong and independent as possible. My challenge is to take the physical, three-dimensional protrusions and merge them with the illusionary flat surface of the canvas and not fool the eye. I like for the two to work in harmony."[5]

Why the zippered mouth? "I can never talk about my work unless I told you that I operate from a pile of trash," he said. Old rags and oil paint provide the bulk of Andrews' material. Most times he just grabs a piece out of his "pile" and uses it. Like many artists, Andrews is sometimes unaware of why he uses something. The zipper "was just there. Of course, if you feel it has another meaning, that's okay too."[6]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Benny Andrews' work often tells the story of the lives of African-Americans, what might *Shades*' story be?

2. Compare this collage to Bearden's *She-Ba*. What are the differences? What are the similarities?

3. In what way is *Shades* like *The Negro Looks Ahead*? How is it different?

4. The title *Shades* has a double meaning, what might they be?

12. Howardena Pindell
1943 -
Birthplace: Philadelphia, PA

Autobiography: Water/ Ancestors/Middle Passage/ Family Ghosts, 1988
Markers, oil stick, paper, polymer, photo-transfer, vinyl tape on sewn canvas
118" x 71"

A brush with death can scare many a survivor into vowing to change, but such promises often go the way of New Year's resolutions. Following an automobile accident that had her pinned inside a car, Howardena Pindell (not one to make empty promises) did examine her life: "After that car accident, I started to really look at my life and see how mortal I was."[1] The result was her epic eight piece autobiographical series, which not only led Pindell down a difficult path of self-discovery, but opened painful sores in the lives of some viewers. "A lot of the images that I use are used to jog people's memories about their own personal history. I try to reach out and teach through my painting."[2]

We may think of this picture as a big pot of stew into which Pindell has thrown all the varied ingredients of her rich life. There she is in the center, with a Michael Jackson-inspired face, standing on her ancestors. All of those eyes symbolize the eyes of the people watching her, "waiting for [her] to die,"[3] or so she thought, after her accident. She resembles the multi-armed Buddhist statues she has seen countless times during her frequent visits to India. A deeply spiritual person and a fearless human rights advocate, Pindell is in many respects like a Buddhist priestess, placing herself at the service of humanity: "People come to me about working in the prisons with young people in terms of how they can face racism in society and not become destructive."[4]

This stew, however, is not lukewarm. It is a steaming indictment of racism. The blindfolded white man signifies white indifference and the text is a certificate of his atrocities. During slavery in North Carolina, if a black female slave was raped by her owner, her husband would be killed for even appearing disgruntled, let alone attempting to rescue her. Pindell feels such assaults on black people continue today in a more insidious form and are ingested into the black psyche, thereby causing much conflict in the black family.

It is unusual to find an historical document making up part of a work of art, but written information has been vital to Pindell since her Philadelphia girlhood when she spent copious hours in the public library. She could not wait for her father to leave work and meet her at her "personal daycare center." "I would read and read and read," she said. "I loved the books, loved the knowledge."[5] Perhaps this is why this picture seems like a hands-on research project. Should we read it? Can we touch it? Or just look at it? Pindell says "I got my science from my father, and my art, my music, and my writing from my mother."[6] Both of her college educated parents encouraged Pindell to be an artist.

Pindell's multimedia approach to art stems from her years working as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art and her nonstop world travels. India, Japan, Brazil, Europe, and especially Africa's decorative art traditions have all crept into her work. Indeed, this hand-

sewn, collaged, and photographed work seems more like craft than art and belies Pindell's rigorous training at Yale University's School of Art. Just as she rebels against racial oppression, she seems to be rebelling against artistic tyranny and challenges us, her viewers, to look at her art with unprejudiced eyes.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. The title of the work is *Autobiography*. What can we learn about Pindell's life from her painting?

2. What might be the significance of the blue in this work? Of the multiple arms? Of the many eyes?

3. Parts of this work have been cut out then sewn back together, why might the artist have done this?

13. Jack Whitten
1939 -
Birthplace: Bessemer, AL

Einstein's Violin, 1991
Acrylic on canvas
73" x 95"

E=mc2. Jack Whitten, a scientist himself, has great respect for Einstein, the scientist who changed the world. Quite naturally he was appalled to read of the Nazi's stealing Einstein's violin during World War II. So, with the same sense of indignation with which he led a group of civil rights marchers in the late 1950s--amid a barrage of eggs, pipes, and racial slurs--he returned Einstein's violin to him not by protest but through art. In other "spiritually uplifting"[1] works, Whitten has "commemorated"[2] Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Rudolf Nureyev, and Romare Bearden.

"The Einstein Painting," Whitten said, "is very much connected to theories Einstein was involved with. [He] had this marvelous notion of how light is bent in space because of gravity. That is something that has always intrigued me. Painters work with light...Henry O. Tanner understood this. That's why he was great... It's just like a carpenter using wood--as raw material. Woodcarving, more than anything has influenced how I make a painting. In my hands the light is the raw material and I handle it very much like a raw material. I cut it, I laminate it, I sand it. The light to me is very physical."[3]

Can we really cut light? Yes, but first we have to catch it. In a "labor intensive"[4] process he refers to as construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, thin layers of acrylic paint are allowed to dry on plastic sheets, next they are cut into little mosaic squares ("tessarae") that are glued onto the canvas. It is in the drying process that light is trapped. Working with these dried chips, Whitten creates endless configurations.

"Where do you buy your glass? How do you cut your glass?" people often ask when they see the artist's shiny grids like *Einstein's Violin*. "People cannot get it into their heads that they are looking at something made from acrylic,"[5] Whitten said. When we realize it is a painting, we can contemplate it as we would any other painting, except for one difference. The optical effects of Whitten's paintings, like *Einstein's Violin*, have been known to induce a transcendental state.

Critics say the sheets of light trapped in his work are "extending the tradition of spiritual metaphor in modernist abstraction."[6] Comments like that place him in the ranks of such modernist trailblazers as Mark Rothko. Whitten acknowledges "this stuff is new I'm working with. No one has seen anything like this. No one has made a painting like this."[7]

"What am I doing here?" Whitten thought to himself. "What am I doing here?" he yelled at the top of his voice. Only this time his R.O.T.C. drill team stopped to stare at him. This is the "Revelation" which brought him to art, to New York, and the Cooper Union where he has been teaching for the past twenty-five years. The pre-med student was gone from Tuskegee Institute after a semester, but not without being impressed with George Washington Carver's "obsession with invention and discovery."[8]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What does this abstract painting remind you of?

2. Whitten has often compared his mosaic-like paintings to his mother's quilts. What do you feel are the similarities?

3. Compare *Einstein's Violin* to Alma Thomas' *Red Azaleas Jubilee*. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

4. What effect does the painting's lack of colors have on you?

14. John Biggers
1924 -
Birthplace: Gastonia, NC

Bank of Angels: Weaving the Seventh World, 1992 - 1993
Oil and acrylic on canvas
48¼" x 72 1/16"

John Thomas Biggers grew up in Gastonia, North Carolina, a provincial Southern mill town. His father, a school principal, was also a Baptist preacher and in his spare time he repaired shoes. His mother stayed home to raise the seven Biggers children until the Great Depression forced her to become a washerwoman.

Life in Gastonia crept along at the expected pace of a town governed year in and year out by the same, relentless routine--one planted, one harvested. The Biggers household was a microcosm of the community: "Each member of the family had his chores to do and their was little cheating, for fair play and honest dealing were a part of the puritanical family code. So were family loyalty, regular church going, and unfailing school attendance."[1]

In 1941, Biggers was happy to leave for the excitement of Virginia's Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). His goal was to become a plumber. However, when art teacher Viktor Lowenfeld encouraged him to study African art, it so impassioned him that Biggers abandoned a plumbing career and followed his mentor to Pennsylvania State University where he received his Ph.D. Inspired Hale Woodruff's success at Atlanta University, Biggers subsequently established the art department at the newly created Texas State University for Negroes in Houston.

Band of Angels: Weaving the Seventh World is laden with symbolism as dense as a medieval tapestry and is ordered on the time honored values of Biggers' Gastonia boyhood. A trip to Africa in 1957 confirmed what he suspected, that there are many African ways ("Africanisms") endemic to African-American society. His boyhood family life was proof. How many people grow up, move away, then later return home later to live? Biggers did. The warmth and security of that sleepy town existed nowhere else--except in this painting.

The first thing we notice in *Band of Angels* is that it is crowded. A bevy of women stand around engaged in all manner of activity. The central figure is weaving the DNA molecule--the source of man--under her cloth. They are surrounded by water--the source of life. Rejuvenation comes with the cleaning of clothes. The women's large feet are symbolic of their important responsibility--to keep civilization going. There are also turtles who, like the sun, are slow yet persistent. The four children on their mothers' backs may represent the four ancient element of earth, wind, fire, and water. The flowers may symbolize growth. Biggers states that virtually everything is symbolic in *Band of Angels*.

Complex patterns also imbue this canvas with a rich, layered look--a metaphor for the continuity of life. There are swirls, lines, angular shapes, and curved ones. Earth tones abound. The influence of Africa is pervasive. Perhaps he saw in African culture, this dignity of man of

which Hale Woodruff spoke: "I learned a long time ago that self-dignity and racial pride could be consciously approached through art."[2]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Where are these women and what are they doing? Are they real or imagined?

2. How many "angels" (women) can you find in this painting? How many babies?

3. Locate and discuss the various reptiles, birds, plant life, and celestial objects (sun and moon) you find.

4. Are these women, babies, reptiles, birds, plant life, and celestial objects symbolic in some way? What might they represent?

5. Biggers travelled to Africa and was greatly influenced by his experience. What African influences can you find in *Band of Angels*?

15. Hughie Lee-Smith
1914 -
Birthplace: Eustis, FL

Summertime, 1989
Oil on canvas
34⅛" x 46"

The biography of a painting can be a priceless lesson in art: "Patricia [Hughie Lee-Smith's wife] went shopping one time," the artist recalled. "On the way back she came across a couple of homes being torn down and thought 'Hughie would love that.' So she rushed home and told me, emphasizing a *dislocated [brick] staircase*. I got in the car, went back, and frantically made sketches and photographs because this whole place was in the process of being torn down."[1]

Just as Duncanson had used architectural ruins, Lee-Smith used rubble to symbolize the romantic theme of civilization in decay: "My paintings are romantic in that there is a great deal of contrast in color, in tonality, and in subject matter which very often has to do with deterioration, breakdown."[2] Following the 1960s civil rights movement, lingering racial discrimination deeply affected him: "I was disappointed at how things remained the same. I became disillusioned and it showed in my work."[3] Since then, "incongruous architectural elements of disproportionate scale and style,"[4] as in *Summertime*, have signified "the conditions under which blacks live in large part...slums, ghettoes."[5]

To reflect on this Lee-Smith had to look no farther than his own dashed hopes. In 1947, this "elder statesman of the American imagination,"[6] who had been exhibiting "masterly"[7] work since the 1930s, found himself working on a Ford assembly line in Detroit. Why, despite consistent critical acclaim, was he excluded from anthologies of art? His stylistic peers--white painters like deChirico, Balthus, and Hopper, had been well documented. Why was no retrospective exhibition of his work done until 1988? His credentials were impeccable. He had taught at the Art Students' League in New York, and in 1967 had been elected a full member of the National Academy of Design, only the second black painter so privileged since Henry O. Tanner's breakthrough admission in 1927. His life, it seemed, was as dislocated as Patricia's staircase.

In *Summertime*, Lee-Smith said, "I was inspired—fascinated by these objects... Painting is a collection of colors, lines, forms. ***First of all it is that.*** Anything else is extraneous—something that is apart from the primary function [of art] which is that you must enjoy the sight—the visual thing. Over the next few weeks I wrestled with ideas."[8] He also stated that "building the painting, using the time-honored principles one finds in Renaissance art, is still basic to good painting--symmetry, balance.[9]

"It's fundamental to any artist to know how to draw and manipulate objects," he said, bemoaning the fact that "artists today are not taught drawing in most places."[10] *Summertime* began as a layer of raw umber underpainting. This gives his work its "mellowness of color."[11] After underpainting, Lee-Smith organized the painting with a meticulous, linear underdrawing. Distancing himself even farther from contemporary artists, he blocks in color last. Positioned in the center of the picture plane, the dislocated staircase, with its strong lines, commands our

attention, as it must have commanded Lee-Smith's. Perhaps the stage-like quality of the staircase also interested him. (Lee-Smith's paintings often include a platform around which figures interact.) To the left, a jumbled heap of horizontals, verticals, and diagonals add to the unease: "I confront the visual world, but I do not reproduce it," he says. "I use it to evoke the kind of emotional response that I get when I see it."[12]

"It got to that point in the painting where I needed something that wasn't there," he continued. "What did I choose? I chose two African-American figures and water." Water is usually running through a Lee-Smith canvas and with sky and perspective evokes an imaginary, surreal landscape. "Why the water? Because water is a special fascination of mine," he said. "I'm from the midwest. The Great Lakes played a very important role in my life. It was part of my being."[13] Perhaps the artist uses water's calm to neutralize the disturbing debris. He may also require its horizontal line to relieve the rubble's jagged edges.

Although Lee-Smith is an acknowledged master of portraiture, and has painted portraits of former New York city major David Dinkins and Justice Thurgood Marshall. In these pictures he is not painting individuals, but archetypes, as Crite did. We meet his archetypal black and white figures in many different settings, amid an assemblage of balloons, streamers, and other stage props. Regardless of the setting, the theme--alienation, loneliness--has been the same--until now. There is something amiss here. Lee-Smith's figures are touching; the bend of the man's left arm echoes the left side of his mate's shirt. Her arm placed on his back shows her support; his acceptance demonstrates love. This artist, who can render peach fuzz palpable, has given their bodies a fleshiness, which in view of their hard-edged surroundings is a counterpoised coup. An airy scarf flows from the man's neck, balanced by a similar drape to the woman's right, expressing "gaiety."[14]

When Lee-Smith added the water and the figures, "everything gelled," he said. "The whole composition worked. It was not until the painting was finished that I realized it was a social painting with very strong social implications. And the subject was the ability of the disadvantaged to overcome adversity. It is the extraordinary disparity between these figures in that setting. [The figures] have elevated themselves. They are on top there looking over and beyond the disadvantages of their circumstances into the broad expanse of the future. ***Again, I would like to emphasize that I did not plan it that way. It just came out that way.***"[15] "Hope, optimism, and the promise of love have overcome Lee-Smith's traditional alienation," wrote critic Carroll Greene, Jr. *Summertime* is destined to become a modern classic."[16]

But why is the painting titled *Summertime*? There is no sun. No beach. "Ah! that's a mystery," answered Lee-Smith who would like to be remembered as "an extraordinarily private person who tried to touch the hearts of others through his art."[17]

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Compare Lee-Smith's *Summertime* to Duncanson's *Recollections of Italy*. What are the similarities, what are the differences? Which artist, do you think, believes human beings are as important as nature?

2. Has Lee-Smith presented us with a hopeful or negative scene? What makes you think so?

3. How does setting, composition, and color support the mood of the painting?

African-American art from the Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum

ENDNOTES

(Artists are listed in order of appearance in packet.)

Robert Scott Duncanson

1. James A. Porter, "Robert Scott Duncanson, Midwestern Romantic-Realist." Art in America, October, 1951, p. 145.
2. Guy McElroy, Essay in catalogue, Robert S. Duncanson, A Centennial Exhibition. Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, March 16-April 30, 1972, p. 14.
3. Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, Essay in catalogue, Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in Nineteenth Century America, p.51.
4. Hartigan in Sharing Traditions, p. 65.

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1. Robert Pincus-Witten, "Washington," Art Forum, October, 1969, p. 71.
2. Henry O. Tanner, Selections from his writings in The Art of Henry O. Tanner, Frederick Douglass Institute in collaboration with the National Collection of Fine Arts, 1969.

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1. Cedric Dover, American Negro Art, New York: New York Graphic Society, 1960, p. 142.
2. Newark Museum, Against The Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation, Newark: Newark Museum, 1989, p. 154.
3. ibid.
4. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Two Centuries of Black American Art, Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 158.

Hale Woodruff

1. Kenkeleba Gallery, The Search For Freedom, African American Abstract Painting, 1945-1975, New York: Kenkeleba House Incorporated, 1991, p. 24.
2. Studio Museum In Harlem, Hale Woodruff, 50 Years of His Art, New York: Studio Museum In Harlem, April 29-June 24, 1979, p. 35.
3. Winifred Stoelting, Hale Woodruff, Artist and Teacher, Atlanta: Emory University, 1978, p. 276.
4. Stoelting, p. 279.

Charles Alston

1. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, A History of African-American Artists, New York: Pantheon, 1993.
2. Bearden and Henderson, p. 269.
3. Ibid.

Alma Thomas

1. Merry A. Foresta, Essay in catalogue A Life in Art: Alma Thomas 1891-1978, Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., November 26, 1981-February 28, 1982, p. 26.

2. Foresta, p. 23.
3. Warren Marr, II, "Alma Thomas: May Crisis Cover Artist," Crisis, May, 1970, p. 193.
4. Foresta, p. 4.
5. Foresta, p. 23.
6. David L. Shirey, "At 77 She's Made It to the Whitney," New York Times Magazine, May 4, 1972, p. 52.
7. Foresta, p. 24.
8. Shirey, p. 52.

Romare Bearden

1. Studio Museum In Harlem, Memory and Metaphor, The Art of Romare Bearden, 1940-1987, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 67.
2. Studio Museum, p. 65.
3. Studio Museum, pp. 48-49.
4. Studio Museum, p. 50.

Lois Mailou Jones

All quotes in this essay are from author's telephone interview with Jones, February 25, 1995.

Allan Rohan Crite

1. Crite narrative in unpublished brush drawings.
2. Crite in interview with the author in Boston, Massachusetts, January 16, 1995.
3. Pearl Strachan, "There May Be Another Whistler or Sargeant Here at Boston's Children's Art Center," The Christian Science Monitor, November 4, 1939, p. 1.
4. Pearl Strachan, "Defense Worker by Day; Artist by Night," The Christian Science Monitor, July 3, 1943, p. 13.

Quotations 5 through 13 are from Boston interview.

Elizabeth Catlett

1. Lynn Norment, "Elizabeth Catlett, Dean of Women Artists," Ebony, April, 1993, p. 48.

Quotations 2 and 4 are from author's telephone interview with Catlett, March 3, 1995.

4. Lowery Stokes Sims, Essay in catalogue, Elizabeth Catlett, June Kelly Gallery, May 8-June 8, 1993.

Quotations 5 and 6 are from Catlett interview.

7. Curtis James, "Elizabeth Catlett, Pulling Against The Grain," American Visions, February/March, 1994, p. 34.
8. Carl Little, "Elizabeth Catlett at June Kelly," Art in America, November, 1993.
9. Samella Lewis, Art: African American, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 125-126.
10. David Driskell, Amistad II: Afro-American Art, Nashville: Fisk University Department of Art, 1975, p. 56.
11. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, A History of African-American Artists, New York: Pantheon, p. 423.
12. James, p. 34.
14. Ibid.

Benny Andrews

1. Andrews in telephone interview with the author, March 7, 1995.
2. Andrews in telephone interview with the author, February 10, 1995.
3. Benny Andrews, "My Working With Collage And Its Meaning As I See It." unpublished, n.d.
4. Andrews interview March 7, 1995.
5. Andrews in telephone interview with the author, May 10, 1993.

Quotations 6 and 7 are from March 7, 1995 interview.

Howardena Pindell

All quotations in this essay from author's telephone interview with Pindell February 19, 1995.

Jack Whitten

Quotations 1 through 5 are from author's telephone interview with Whitten February 23, 1995.

6. Ken Johnson, "Jack Whitten at Horodner Romley," Art in America, February, 1990.

Quotations 7 and 8 are from Whitten interview.

John Thomas Biggers

1. Elton Fax, Seventeen Black Artists, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1971, p. 269.
2. Fax, p. 282.

Hughie Lee-Smith

Quotations 1 through 3 are from author's interview with Lee-Smith in Cranbury, New Jersey, February 20, 1995.

4. Lowery Stokes Sims, Essay in catalogue Hughie Lee-Smith Retrospective Exhibition, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, New Jersey, November 5, 1988-January 2, 1989.
5. Lee-Smith interview.
6. Gerrit Henry, "Hughie Lee-Smith at June Kelly," Art in America, February, 1990, p. 168.
7. Ibid.

Quotations 8 through 15 are from Lee-Smith interview.

16. Carroll Greene, Jr., "Hughie Lee-Smith, Break Through," American Visions, August, 1990, p. 28.
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GLOSSARY

Vocabulary words for the African-American Artists Slide Kits

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abstract	art that does not represent the actual appearance of objects, real or imaginary
Abstract Expressionism	an American style of art which emerged in New York in 1940s and 1950s and became an international movement, stressing the role of the unconscious act of creation; action painting of Jackson Pollock most usually associated with the movement
academic	a representational type of art that adheres to the strict standard of 19th-century taste and technique and was defined by French academies, careful painting or drawing from the nude
acrylic	a type of paint using a synthetic medium whose drying qualities are faster than oil paints
aerial perspective	a technique of perspective whereby a sense of depth is created by depicting the background in colors which grow progressively paler or are cooled towards blue suggesting intervening atmosphere
bronze	a metal alloy of copper and smaller proportions of tin and sometimes zinc and lead
Byzantine	art of the Eastern Roman Empire from 330 A.D. when Constantinople was dedicated capital of the Roman Empire in the east (to 1453); stylistically, naturalism lost its place to a heightened spiritual expression
collage	a work of art created by arranging and gluing assorted paper and other materials onto a flat surface
cubism	an art movement which began in 1908 by Pablo Picasso and George Braque as an attempt to represent more fully on a flat surface what the artist saw in three dimensions, a depiction of space which differed from one-point perspective attempting to achieve multiple points of view
daguerreotype	an early photographic process, announced to the public in 1839, printed on a silvered copper plate, named after inventor L.J. M. Daguerre
foreground	a part of the composition that is closest to the viewer, as opposed to middleground or background
foreshortening	a technique of perspective which creates the illusion of depth through the depiction of an object lying at an angle to the picture plane

genre scenes	paintings which depict scenes from everyday life
glazing	a transparent layer of paint brushed over a dried underlayer to give luminosity and depth to the work
The Great Migration	the exodus of African-Americans who left their homes and farms in the South around the time of World War I and traveled to northern industrial cities in search of better lives. This movement resulted in one of the biggest population shifts in the history of the U.S., and the migration is still going on for many people today.
Harmon Foundation	established by wealthy real estate developer William E. Harmon, set up to provide "Negro Achievement Awards", including one for art. Foundation organized touring art exhibitions which helped gain public attention for African-American art and artists in a critical period between 1928 and 1935.
Hudson River School	a loosely-knit group of American landscape painters who flourished in the mid-19th century whose chief subject matter was the landscape of the Hudson River Valley and Catskill Mountains; Thomas Cole is considered the founder. They had a romantic approach to nature, emphasizing scale, beauty, and nobility.
impasto	thick, opaque paint applied with a brush, knife, or fingers, creating various textural features on the surface of a painting
mosaic	a surface decoration made by applying small pieces of various colored material into cement or plaster to form a picture or pattern
perspective	the means by which a sensation of three-dimensional space or depth is created on a flat surface. Linear perspective is based upon a fixed, central viewpoint and relies on the optical impression that parallel lines converge as they recede towards a vanishing point and that objects appear smaller and closer together in the distance.
realism	when objects, people, or places are depicted in a way an unidealized and objective manner
Underground Railroad	network of routes and hiding places that aided runaway slaves on their way to freedom in the Northern states before the Civil War
W.P.A.	Works Progress Administration, a federal arts project to aid American artists between 1933 and 1943; made to help artists jeopardized by the growing Depression, primarily to sponsor the decoration of public buildings